

You Had to Be There

Russell Martin

Example 1. Photographed from above, the young woman in the fur bikini looks fittingly joyous as she rubs slabs of meat and fish into her semi-naked body. Gore of some kind (the photograph is black and white, and it's difficult to make out exactly the offal being smeared around) festoons breasts and chests, buttocks and arms.

Example 2. A man, covered completely in some kind of white powder, stands looking at the floor—a catwalk construction covered in a similar white substance. From cuts in the man's wrists flows a steady stream of blood, patterning the walkway and splashing his thighs and feet.

Example 3. Amateur sprinters are invited to run as fast as they can down one of the main exhibition spaces of a national art museum. The artist emphasizes the importance of first-hand experience: being in the gallery space with runners dodging past visitors, and the general feeling of surprise of being forced to move in a different way. Newspaper images show blurred runners speeding past gallery visitors standing to one side of a makeshift path.

Three documents of three iconic works of performance art. The aesthetic style is familiar after a while—photographs with unusual goings-on, people looking bemused and detached from their surroundings, ruminating intellectuals. As methods to record and publish the events of performance art, photography, film and video remain the documentary materials *par excellence* for artists working in ephemeral, performative and time-based practices. Starting in the art-education system, photography begins to take primacy over the live event as a means to allow assessment and comparability between students and institutions. Documentation proves a student's participation in contemporary practice and allows for a study of the academic "quality" of their work, becoming both the kernel and template of a professional visual art portfolio, evidencing activity, disseminating concepts of an artist's practice and helping them sustain a professional career.

From these beginnings, the documentary is embedded in performative practice, in many cases *standing in* for the event of performance in publications, exhibitions, as visual aides for conferences and artist talks: in short, in any place where the work of art is not. Without the document, so we are led to believe, critical debate around performance works and dissemination of ideas are impossible, careers strangled in infancy without any record of existence. It is received wisdom that without a broad professional and public knowledge of an artist's *oeuvre*, exhibitions, jobs and income are as unavailable as the income from sales of photographs and videos of a practice that has no material basis.

As an artist who has worked in performative practices for over ten years, I should be enthusiastic in my support for documentation as a means to income and exposure. Yet I refuse to record any of the works I have made. This decision, regularly revisited but never, so far, changed, is a result of my

ongoing unease about the impossibility of translating between experience and document, a translation that can do no more than deform my work and outweigh any supposed advantages to my career.

From an initial training in sculpture, I moved into what could be considered “performance art proper” (unusual physical activity over extended periods of time, general use of props, a requirement for witnesses, a document created at the time for wider dissemination).¹ I tried to create performances that would allow for questions and interruptions from the audience about the sometimes mystifying activity I was engaged in; when these interruptions became more valuable to me than the work I was devising, I began to focus on group dialogue as a sole medium for my practice. In common with other performance art, dialogue is an activity existing uniquely in a certain time and space, unrepeatably but able to be restaged. Usually, I initiate a situation for dialogue—either by inviting specific people to take part or holding larger, public events—allowing dialogue to be created spontaneously instead of setting subjects or areas to be discussed in advance. Dialogue, like performance, is bounded by a specific spatio-temporal edge, and can last for many hours at a time. There is no audience in my practice as it may be traditionally conceived—instead, everyone who attends participates in both the enactment and creation of the piece. The first few of these pieces I made in the late 1990s were indeed documented—an activity I would have probably continued had I not had the sudden realization that I no longer understood why I should continue to do so. Any document of such a practice, of all performance practice, is doomed to failure, I reasoned—even if aiming only for a glancing similarity or record of an activity taken place, all I ever ended up with were photographs of people in a room, or video of conversations no longer alive. Unless the document remained in the same medium as the original work it always became an impoverished, slightly ridiculous and embarrassing relic of a time and space absolutely impossible to access. Documents became simply a means to prove that an activity had taken place instead of disseminating or enlivening a practice.

And so I stopped.

Performance work is generally documented in multiple ways—perhaps through video, stills photography, writing, drawing. Despite the existence of this volume of material, after a while only a handful of images survive to stand for the work in its broadest disseminated reach. These images enter a crowded, competitive public environment through the marketing and publicity machinery of galleries and public bodies, the internet, specialist and general publications. They wrestle with the dominant visual modes in Western culture—advertising, television, feature film, newspapers, graffiti, badges, slogans, logos.... Any competitive field will create its own language, a shorthand, a grammatical mechanism of compression to make images metonymically stand in for events or concepts both for the quick digestion of viewers and to make the most of limited space. Documents of performance art enter this field on unequal terms, a field that does not encourage objective or poetic representations for prolonged engagement (outside of highly specialist and exclusive educated elites with the time and inclination to engage). Performance art documentation cannot assert its differ-

¹ For a fuller account of my practice see www.russellmartin.org.uk

ence from these dominant visual modes; in this way performance *becomes* a single image or small unrepresentative collection of images and the originating event is obscured beneath the suffocating weight of the distilled document.

For me, reproducible images are inappropriate to convey the uniqueness of the event.² Documents have a tendency, over time, to simply *prove* that an event occurred, instead of conveying anything specific about it. The thinking, composing photographer or filmmaker who creates the document is constantly interpreting the action to make an engaging record for *future* viewers. What goes on outside the frame—or what is left on the cutting room floor—remains unseen. Like the closed-circuit security camera footage shown on reality television cop shows, the document tacitly promotes the falsehood of an unbiased, unedited, truthful, complete record of an event. Exhibited documentation, in common with many elements of an artist's practice, is the culmination of careful editorial and presentational decisions that draw on the familiar processes of filmic and photographic methodologies such as framing, composition, lighting, zoom and pan, scenery. It presents a uniform, sanctioned selection of images, texts or films to present this work—and by extension, this artist—in the best possible light, airbrushing out the contingent, the messy, the *experience* of witnessing live performance at first hand. A translation from performance to document is inevitably an impoverishing and banalizing process that encourages the uncritical acceptance of an image instead of the experience of a unique event.³

What is a performance? A performance is an event where things happen; by this I mean a unique part of time and space, inseparable from the time and space in which it occurred. It is bounded by a beginning and end, although the beginning and end can sometimes be difficult to notice. Although technically repeatable, any repetition cannot revisit the originary event that the performance was; this is physically inaccessible to all of us, even the performer and her original audience. How do we document the ephemeral? We cannot. We can—and do—try every time we take a camera on holiday or videotape a wedding, every time we photograph a performance or buy a postcard at an exhibition. Instead of documenting the event, however, we always end up with *a document of our experience of the event*; a private souvenir broken off from a past we can no longer perceive. When the document of a single-viewpoint experience stands in for the performance, becomes the performance, is accepted as a recorded totem of the performance, we forget that we are asking too much of an object and forgetting the limitations of our souvenir. It is very good at reminding us, we who witnessed the event, that we were there and what it might have felt like to be there, through the distorting lens of our own memories. But without documenting everything—

² It is interesting also to note that image reproducibility can lead to an unawareness of the uniqueness of the art object as well. In a past job working with a public art collection in the UK, a catalogue was sent to one of the organisation's offices to encourage staff to choose works from the collection for their walls. One response was a request to have a particular landscape painting installed but only if it could be provided "without the tree."

³ Some of this argument was discussed during a live radio broadcast on surveillance I took part in as part of the London LIFT festival, Southbank Centre, in July 2008, organised by Cecilia Wee.

every look, every sensation in every audience member and the performer—the document cannot meet our demands to *represent* this experience we have had.

What does the document do? We want it to record; it does not. We want it to speak on behalf of a practice that has spoken in the past and has gone, and we want this speech to transcend our specific, stubbornly single physical presence. I would insist that, when viewing performance, you really have to *be there*. I do not have to speak to everyone at once, do not need to broadcast. I can talk to one person at a time. Performance is a physically restricted practice, demanding presence and experience over dissemination and publication. In an era of artistic production witnessing a rise in so-called socially engaged or relational practices, many of which share performance's spatio-temporal specificity, coupled with an easy access to recording equipment, the unconsidered use of documentation is bound to multiply.

Ultimately, documents of performance art share the problem of the shovel. A shovel is generally described as a tool to use in the garden to dig soil; but this is what it does, not what it is. A shovel is a wooden stick with a handle on one end and a flat piece of metal on the other; but this tells us nothing about what its purpose is, why it is useful. Until we consider what documents *do*, instead of what they *are*, performance can only reliably count on its own materiality for dissemination. Without the document I am still *doing something*, but that doing does not necessarily include a *making something*.